

135. *Turdus ustulatus swainsonii*.— Abundant in spring, rarely seen in fall.

136. *Merula migratoria propinqua*.— Common. Breeds. Have found them common also among the pines during the breeding season, fifty miles from a house.

137. *Sialia arctica*.— Common. Breeds among the pines on the divides; rarely seen elsewhere.

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## AN HOUR WITH BAIRD'S AND LECONTE'S SPARROWS NEAR ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI.

BY O. WIDMANN.

RICHFIELD, St. Charles County, Missouri, is a station on the Keokuk and Northwestern R. R., forty miles northwest of St. Louis. I do not know who gave the name to the station, but presume that it was an ornithologist, since the vicinity is an exceedingly rich field for the study of birds. Oct. 13, 1894, I identified fifty-five species and added fifteen more the next day. In these two days I had gone over only a part of the ground, mainly the wooded portion, adjacent to Cuivre River and Horse Shoe Lake. The marsh had not been explored. To do this I returned on the 18th, or rather, I was on the marsh before daylight, watched the Meadowlarks, the Cedarbirds, the Robins, the Blackbirds and Ducks leave their roosting places in the marsh; and it was here at the border of Mud Lake that I found the Baird's Sparrow, two individuals, in company with other Sparrows, mainly *Ammodramus* and *Melospiza*.

Not being a 'shootist,' I cannot lay the bird before you. I have to beg you to accompany me into the field to the scene of the encounter. Mud Lake is one of a series of marsh lakes, all of which are more or less connected by sloughs and are the common receptacle of the precipitation in the surrounding country. In times of highwater in the Mississippi River the whole system is filled by backwater, pouring in through the Cuivre River and overflowing the marshes, which are on that account not cultivated, except the highest levels, forming islands in the ocean of

grasses and weeds which grow in profusion. Parts are used for pasturing, and the whole landscape is richly dotted with trees, singly and in groups, mostly pin oaks, and honey locusts, with clusters of persimmons, which, shooting up as thickly as weeds, are a peculiar feature of the landscape.

It is seven A. M., and the point of observation is a clump of locusts at the southeast border of the lake, so as to have the sunlight in the back. It is well to be in the shade; the October sun is pretty warm, even at this early hour. We had 80° F. yesterday and to-day promises to be still warmer.

Mud Lake, as the name implies, is not more than knee-deep, but last month's rain caused a rise of six inches, and the water now covers about 200 acres. It is entirely overgrown with spatter dock in the deeper places, with smartweed in shallower water, and all around its edge for a varying width. Encircling the regular expanse of water is a fringe of low willows and elbow wood, mostly dead and crumbling, killed by fire some years ago. In back of the willow fringe begins the endless ocean of marsh grasses, mainly *Spartina cynosuroides*, growing on damper ground as high as six feet; in drier situations it is lower, and in some is entirely overgrown with boneset and a few other weeds, mostly of the family Compositæ.

A second circle of treegrowth, back of the willow circle, is composed principally of honey locusts, which are at this moment very conspicuous objects all over the landscape through the golden yellow of all their leaves. The pin oaks are still green, with only the tops and outer tips of branches turning crimson, affording quite an ornament to the monotony of the marsh, which has at present a sombre yellow cast over the higher grasses while the predominance of *Eupatorium* covers the lower grasses with a hoary mantle. The smartweed region is still green but with a strong admixture of yellow and brown shades. The shriveling spatter docks form a sadly withering, shapeless mass of gray and brown tints, though partly trampled down by cattle and thus exposing large patches of open water. The lake is on club grounds, but in hot weather duck shooting is at a discount, and in days like this, when no hunter appears on the scene, we and the birds have the ground all to ourselves.

The air is filled with bird voices; the Blackbirds are seen and heard in all directions. What would the marsh be without its Blackbirds? A dreary ocean of monotony! With them all is life, ever-changing life; a constant coming and going, a uniting and separating, now here, now there, down on the ground, high in the air and even on the lake itself; and withal a kaleidoscopic frolic, produced by only a small variety of individual sounds, perhaps not more in number than the letters of our alphabet, but through their endless and ever-varying juxtaposition, creating a medley of indescribable and unique grandeur.

Just back of us in the persimmon patch there is as busy an army of feeding birds as can be found; they are on the ground, almost covering it. Every now and then, without apparent cause, all go up in a body—and what a cloud they make! They are all Red-winged Blackbirds, old and young, but those in spotted garb outnumber the redshouldered black as ten to one. The persimmon fruit is now ripe and ready to drop. The whirl of the hundreds of wings is heard only for a moment; after a beautifully executed turn the cloud settles on the now leafless trees on which some fruit is still hanging.

Probably the whole manœuvring is carried out only for the purpose to shake the fruit from the trees; the last has hardly settled in the trees when the first already begin to descend, and soon all feed eagerly on the sweet and succulent persimmons lying on the ground.

At once there is another rustle of wings and all go up into the trees. A young Redtail approaches and settles right in their midst. Not a single one of the Blackies leaves the trees; the only precaution they take is that they gain a position above him. They are evidently not a bit afraid of him. His eyes are fixed upon the ground beneath, but he does not find there what he is looking for. The Redwings have monopolized the persimmon grounds to the exclusion of fur-bearing lovers of the tidbit.

From dozens of happy throats comes the pleasing song of the Meadowlark; they seem to take now the leading part in the concert, which the Robin had a little earlier in the morning. Into the tree above us a party of Goldfinches drops for a minute. They rest, but only their wings rest; the tongues do not rest, and though

there are only a dozen birds overhead, one could think there were several scores of them, every one saying something pleasant.

Now a great big bird lazily wings its short way across the spatter docks and alights about two hundred yards away in the smartweeds. It is a Bittern, and for fully three minutes the cautious bird never moves a muscle; with long, out-stretched neck, and with bill pointed skyward, it stands immovably erect until it stoops down into the weeds and disappears. This seems to be the signal for his comrade to join him, and following in the same track through the air, he alights at the same spot.

All the while, since we are here, the border of the lake, the oozy region of the willows and elbow wood, has neither been deserted nor neglected. When we came we found a number of Savanna Sparrows, all dark-spotted birds with rich yellow suffusion about the head. There are several Swamp Sparrows scattered along the edge of the water, and we are treated to a few fine recitations by the Song Sparrows behind the curtain. A Lincoln Sparrow slips stealthily through the debris at our feet and a Snipe, the beauty of whose plumage can never be appreciated after death, nimbly runs away a few yards, sits deliberately down on the oozy ground and for a moment seems to consider the possibilities of escape. Having the example fresh in mind, we also play the Bittern and soon have the satisfaction to see our beautiful Longbill resume its wonted occupation until, frightened by the sudden appearance of a Coot in the smartweeds near by, it jumps into the air and with a nasal sound of leave darts into space unknown.

What is this, sitting in the willows in front of us? We see its back only, but this black-streaked head above a peculiarly yellow neck looks very suspicious. Have we not been looking out for such a distinctly marked bird for a long time? Should it be Baird's Sparrow? What else could it be? Look at the fawn-colored rump, the plain unmarked area reaching high up; indeed, the spotted area of the upper part being more like a saddle, hardly more than an inch in width, all the rest of the upper part being a brownish-yellow of such a peculiar warm tint, that it has no equal. The tail is blackish and slender. Now, how obliging! It hops to another twig and presents its underparts in all their

characteristic beauty: a pure white with a collar of real black adorning the breast in the form of a V; only a few spots on the sides, thus leaving the area above and below the collar a pure white, upon which the pink feet appear in sharp contrast. The bill also is pink and there is only a light streak of brown from the bill down. The dark eye protrudes directly from the yellow face without the least orbital mark, but behind the cheek there is a small wedge-shaped spot of warm brown pointing from the eye. The black crown streaks are seen now in all their characteristic marking.

When the bird thought the sitting had lasted long enough to afford me a good likeness, it disappeared, not to be seen again, but following the water's edge a second one came into view, flying up into a willow. The post-auricular spot, in the other faintly indicated, was here well pronounced and large, but the breast-band had less continuity, especially the median spots were smaller.

Sitting on the branch, its upright carriage and general contour reminded me of *Zonotrichia leucophrys*, the difference in size being hardly appreciable. When a general stampede of the frightened Fringillidæ occurred, this bird joined the rest, alighting repeatedly in willows until lost to sight. While still on the lookout for other members of the noble Baird family, I wondered whether a bird so peculiar in color and marking may vary at different seasons so much that it could be described in books with introductions like "with a general resemblance to Savanna."

But the field is not the place for studying book-descriptions, and the constant changes which go on before our eyes soon absorb our entire attention. The Grackles, all pure and simple *æneus* as far as we can see, are paying an interesting and interested visit to the top-shaped receptacles of the spatter docks, from which the nuts have fallen, thus affording splendid lurking places for different forms of lower animal life. It is a pleasing picture to see the glossy, graceful birds alight on such a curious perch and bending down peep into every nut-hole.

A flutter of dark steel-blue wings set off against a reddish-gray body and a party of Rusty Blackbirds alights in the button-bush near by. They came to rest, and soft, melodious notes escape their throats, as if dreaming of times gone by and places far

remote. One has spied something in the weeds below and, hanging Oriole-fashion from the lowest branch, dips down its head and body for a moment and emerges with a big dragon-fly, which it soon dispatches wings and all.

A fine old Marsh Hawk, in blue mantle and reddish apron, who has been overhauling the marsh with untiring wing ever since sunrise, pays a flying visit to the lake, but the birds do not mind him much; all seem to be on friendly terms with him. Six Mallards which had been lying still amidst the sheltering plants go up with tokens of surprise and swinging around are heading for Horse Shoe Lake, two drakes in front, the females closely in pursuit. A solitary Purple Finch alights in the tree over our head, gives half a dozen calls, a few strains of music, and proceeds. The Savannas which we found along the lake on our arrival have long since disappeared among the grasses of the marsh, but the Swamp Sparrows are getting quite familiar. They are well dressed for this time of the year, bright chestnut and blue-gray colors in conspicuous places, but the bright red cap which they donned before departure in the spring must have been left behind somewhere in the neighborhood of their nests.

From the direction the Mallards took comes the report of a heavy gun, and the Mallards come flying back in haste, but there are only five of them.

In the locust over our head a most startling outcry is now heard, almost like a chicken in great distress. It is a Shrike, which therewith calls the attention of its mate to the hidden foe beneath, saying, no doubt, "Be on your guard, there is one of those monstrous gum-boots who carry thunder and lightning into our tranquil habitation, and shed the blood of the innocent wherever they go." *Kri kri* comes from the neighboring tree, meaning clearly: "I see him, I keep an eye on him; better let us go"; and off they go.

Turning away from the lake we follow the slough, a narrow ditch inclosed by a wide border of flags, several feet high, deep green below, but cinnamon on the tips. This is the home of the Marsh Wrens, and one, with a conspicuous superciliary, almost white and sharply contrasting against the plain dark pileum comes up into a bush and sings its simple tune, keeping



time with the tail, which goes rhythmically up and down. Several more of the Longbills come into sight but only one of the little Shortbills has the courage to show its streaked head above the sheltering flags.

Since we advanced through the high marsh-grass, many small birds have jumped out, not exactly from under our feet, but within two or three yards, and after a short, nervous flight, in which they alternately spread and fold the pointed tail-feathers, sink down and out of sight among the wavy yellow blades. Although the flight is short, a quick and practised eye can catch the yellow hue of neck and head and, together with its diminutive size, we know him well,—it is our friend the Leconte Sparrow. But presently we shall be treated to a novel sight. Five of the beautiful creatures adorn the leafless branches of a little hawthorn tree, eight feet in height and raising its head only a few feet above the tips of the surrounding grasses. A sixth one comes up to take a seat; it is now their time to take an airing and a sunning, the only hour of the day when they remain thus exposed to view for any length of time. We pass a few more of these isolated thorn-trees, standing in line like sentinels along the slough, as if to keep the flags from marching upon the domain of the grasses. Each one has at this hour a small contingent of Lecontes, who after paying a visit to the watery region of the flags return to dry and preen upon the branches. But our hour is over.

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## NOTES AND EXTRACTS FROM A LETTER OF EDWARD HARRIS.

BY GEORGE SPENCER MORRIS.<sup>1</sup>

INCIDENTS connected with the lives of the great naturalists of a past generation must always be of interest to those who seek to follow in their footsteps in after years.

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<sup>1</sup> Read before the Delaware Ornithological Club.